

Gwala Raikar Samiti as a Living Customary Institution Among the Kham Magars: Sustaining Land, Livelihoods and Leadership in Rukum East, Nepal

Dipak Raj Rai

Kathmandu University, School of Education, Lalitpur, NEPAL

Prakash Roka

Independent Researcher, Rukum East, NEPAL

Madan Budha

NCRS, Rukum West, NEPAL

Received: 15 July 2025 ▪ Revised: 21 October 2025 ▪ Accepted: 10 November 2025

Abstract

This study examines the Gwala Raikar Samiti (herders' land tenure committee), a customary self-governance institution of the Kham Magar community in Bhume, Rukum East, Nepal, which has historically managed land, livelihoods, seasonal mobility, and local resources. While customary governance remains vital in many Indigenous communities, its role under modern state intervention and socio-economic pressures is often overlooked. This article explores the structure, functions, and continuing relevance of the Gwala Raikar Samiti in sustaining land use, seasonal pastoralism, dispute resolution, communal activities, and environmental stewardship. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, data were generated through oral histories, observations, and interviews with 15 participants, including elders, youths, herders, and community leaders, across five villages. The findings reveal that the Gwala Raikar Samiti regulates pastoral migration, sets agricultural product prices, resolves disputes, and leads cultural and environmental stewardship. Although land reforms, decentralization, and shifting livelihoods have weakened its formal role, the institution continues to exist, sustained by cultural legitimacy. However, declining youth engagement and limited state recognition threaten its future sustainability. The study underscores the community efforts to preserve and adapt the Gwala Raikar Samiti, affirming its significance in contemporary discussions of indigenous governance and ecological resilience. It contributes to policy and debates on integrating customary institutions to protect the environment, sustain local autonomy, and promote sustainable rural livelihoods.

Keywords: customary governance, Gwala Raikar Samiti, Kham Magar, livelihoods, Nepal.

1. Introduction

Customary governance refers to a community-based system of leadership, regulation, and decision-making grounded in traditional practices, customs, and norms within a specific community. It is deeply rooted in a particular group's historical, religious, and cultural traditions, and these systems operate independently of formal, institutionalised modern government systems (Magar, 2022). These systems are often orally transmitted and embedded in local customs rather than written law and preserved through collective memory, elder's authority, and spiritual-cultural practices (Mukuro, 2009). Customary self-governance allows indigenous communities to exercise their inherent and inseparable right to self-determination, spiritual authority, and collective power, enabling them to govern freely without external interference or colonial influence (Bhattachan, 2023; Thami, 2024). Customary laws are a set of ancient rules based on the community's ways of life and needs; this shared knowledge of the community evolves through generations, is retained in the memory of elders, and is passed down through generations until forgotten or until they become part of the immemorial rules (Sherpa, 2024).

Across the world, Indigenous communities have long maintained traditional governance systems to sustain livelihoods, manage natural resources, resolve disputes, and uphold community well-being (Bhattachan, 2023; Berkes, 2012; Boege, 2011). These customary institutions play a significant role in resource management and community decision-making on all continents of the world. As Robson and Wiest (2014) note, implementing traditional governance systems requires collective actions and reinforces community cohesion and ecological balance.

In Nepal, a country of remarkable ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity with 142 ethnicities, 124 mother tongues, and 10 religious groups (National Statistics Office, 2021), Indigenous peoples have historically practised a similar governance system to promote local resilience. Yet, despite their relevance, customary institutions are marginalised or rarely acknowledged in Nepal's legal framework. Although Nepal's 2015 constitution opened some space for legal recognition, state-led approaches often prioritise assimilation over true autonomy, threatening the distinctiveness of these systems by bringing indigenous governance under state jurisdiction (Thami, 2024; Rai, 2024). As a result, many traditional governance systems have either faded or completely disappeared due to the reformation and centralisation of state-level governance. While some conventional governance structures, such as local councils and customary legal practices, have been officially recognised and integrated into the modern legal framework, others persist in a diminished capacity, operating informally within specific communities under increasing pressure of evolving state administrative frameworks (Matose, Oyono and Murombedzi, 2019).

Among Nepal's Indigenous groups, the Magar people are one of the largest groups and have maintained a unique customary governance system reflecting their cultural values, community organisation, and traditional authority structures. The Kham Magars, who occupy the major territory of Athara Magarat (a historical confederation of 18 Magar kingdoms), are one of the sub-groups within the Magar communities, live in Baglung, Rukum, and Rolpa districts, and have their own community-specific traditional governance systems, such as the Dera Chief system (clan-based chief), the Kachahari-Mukhiya system, Gaa Khardari Samiti (land tenure committee), and the Gwala Mukhiya system (herder chief committee) (Pant et al., 2023; Rai, 2024).

In our study location, Bhume, Ward No. 2 of Bhume Rural Municipality, Rukum East, Nepal, the population is densely composed of Kham Magars, including clans such as Pun, Budha, Gharti, and Roka. Each major village within this area maintains its traditional governance system known as the Gwala Raikar Samiti (herders' land tenure committee) or Gwala Samiti (herders'

committee). Led by the Mukhiya (chieftain), this Samiti manages communal grazing lands, seasonal pastoral migration, and natural resource use, and settles local disputes through collective decision-making.

Although traditional governance systems like those of the Kham Magar are still active in places like Rukum East, they have received limited scholarly attention on how they function today, especially under modern pressures such as youth migration, privatisation, and administrative restructuring. This study aims to fill that gap by examining the structure, leadership, and contemporary relevance of the Gwala Raikar Samiti in Bhume, Rukum East, Nepal. Drawing on ethnographic insights, it highlights how this customary governance institution continues to shape land use, livelihoods, and community cohesion and discusses its potential role in informing more inclusive governance.

2. Research methods

We intentionally selected the villages, namely Gabang, Saipatung, Khabang, Junga, and Kankri, located in Ward No. 2 of Bhume Rural Municipality, Rukum East district, western Nepal. These villages cover a total geographical area of 55 square kilometres and are home to the Kham Magar, an Indigenous community. The Kham Magars are a people of ancient Mongolian descent inhabiting the Rapti highlands, east of the valleys in the Karnali-Bheri basin on the southwestern flank of the Dhaulagiri massif (Waters, 1975). They speak a Tibeto-Burman language known as Kham, or Kham Kura (pang), with an estimated forty thousand speakers (De Sales, 2003; Thapa, 2019). Due to their shared linguistic and cultural heritage, they are collectively identified as Kham Magars.

The Kham Magars densely populate the study area and maintain rich living traditions, including language, festivals, cultural dances, and songs. According to the most recent census, selected villages (formerly known as Kankri) for study comprise 486 households with a total population of 2,288 (National Statistics Office, 2022). Their primary occupations include agriculture, cattle rearing, and seasonal migration for employment. The settlement pattern in the study area differs from the eastern rural villages of Nepal, as villages are compact and clustered, with 35–115 households living nearby. This clustered settlement pattern may have contributed to the preservation and development of unique cultural practices compared to the other communities.

This study employed a qualitative approach within an ethnographic framework, drawing on epistemological sources such as oral histories, personal narratives, memory, and interpretations (Bertram et al., 2017; Kenyon, 2016; Smith, 1999). A political ecology lens was used to examine the role of Gwala Raikar Samiti as a socio-ecological institution that manages the land, livelihoods, leadership, and adaptations (Robbins, 2012). Participants were purposefully selected and included Gwala Raikar Samiti members, village leaders, and livestock herders.

Conversational interviews were conducted with five Gwala Raikar Samiti members (all male) from five different Samities, three youth members, two village leaders and knowledge holders, and five pastoral migrants. In total, 15 participants (10 males and 5 females) aged between 25 and 70 years contributed to the study. Additionally, direct observation of the village life, Gwala Raikar Samiti meetings, meeting records, and pastoral lands provided first-hand information on the functions and role of the traditional governance system of the Kham Magars. The information from the individuals and observation helped us to understand the polity, structure, contributions, and present condition of the Gwala Raikar Samiti.

Data collection involved detailed note-taking, audio recording, and full transcriptions. The data generated was analysed through multiple readings to identify key ideas, followed by coding, categorisation, and theme development. Finally, these themes were

interpreted to address the purpose of the study. We followed ethical procedures by obtaining informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and showing respect for the local people and culture throughout the study process.

3. Structure and functions of Gwala Raikar Samiti

The Gwala Raikar Samiti (herders' land tenure committee) is a traditional governance system of the Kham Magar community that has historically played a significant role in managing land, resources, agriculture, livestock herding, and communal activities in villages in the Rukum East district of western Nepal. This governance system is often referred to as Gwala Raikar or Gwala Mukhiya in Kham Magar villages, while in some villages, it is also known as Gaau Khardari Samiti (village land tenure committee). The present members of the Gwala Raikar Samiti mentioned that this traditional governance system was in operation before the formal unification of modern Nepal under King Prithvi Narayan Shah in the 1760s (Pinter, 2022) and continued to function even after the establishment of the royal rule and beyond.

The Gwala Raikar Samiti System is traditionally composed of five members: the Mukhiya (chieftain, known as Sher in the Kham Magar language); Taivilya (treasurer); the Baidar (writer/record-keeper); and two additional members, making a total of five. Although there are only three primary positions, all members share responsibilities and work collaboratively to ensure the smooth functioning of the system, particularly in decision-making and administrative matters. The tenure of the Gwala Raikar Samiti members is five years, with the possibility of reappointment for subsequent terms. Members of the Gwala Raikar Samiti are collectively selected through a village meeting.

Each major village in Rukum East within a Kham Magar community has its own Gwala Raikar Samiti, which operates independently, rooted in its traditional knowledge, moral authority, and place-based knowledge. The primary responsibilities of the Gwala Raikar Samiti include managing communal resources, such as forests and pastoral lands; regulating livestock movement; enforcing fines for negligence; and ensuring compliance with communal rules. The committee convenes meetings twice a year, in Mangsir (mid-November to mid-December) and Jestha (mid-May to mid-June), where financial transactions are presented, and warnings or penalties are issued to those who violate customary rules and plan communal activities. The Samiti oversees raising and managing funds related to ceremonies, village development, and emergency relief activities. Decisions and important information are communicated to the villages through the village Katuwal (messenger), who announces messages loudly from a central location where all households can hear. Notably, the Gwala Raikar Samiti operates independently of state government supervision without any tax obligations and addresses local issues and needs autonomously. A gradual shift is observed in the selection process of the Gwala Raikar Samiti in neighbouring villages of the study area, as the institution has begun to include non-Kham Magar individuals and female representatives from various sub-villages within the larger community, making it more inclusive and participatory. This shift appears to be representational but requires further study to assess its effectiveness in safeguarding the cultural heritage of the broader community, including Kham Magars.

4. Traditional livelihoods and land management

The Gwala Raikar Samiti plays a vital role in sustaining livelihoods through regulated land management and seasonal migration. Kham Magar families engage in planned seasonal migratory movements to designated highlands (Lekh), following a well-established customary calendar unique to each village. Typically, migration occurs in two main phases: the first from March to May and the second from June to November for grazing and harvest. During March and

April, depending on rainfall, families cultivate potatoes, beans, maize, wheat, herbs, and marijuana (*bhang*). From mid-June to August, they move to hillside pastures along with their livestock to tend the marijuana and simultaneously prepare manure for the following planting season. A subsequent phase of migration occurs in October and November, focusing on the harvest of crops and marijuana. A former *Mukhiya* (chieftain), Mr. Nara Bahadur Budha (age 65), describes:

“We migrate seasonally to three different locations to secure our livelihoods and support our children's educational expenses. The majority of the households migrate to the specified pastoral land with their cattle. They also do minimal agricultural activities in the pastoral area, collect herbs, and grow marijuana. Families also jointly decide and divide household labourers to go to India for work or cities of Nepal, look after the house, including their crops in the lowlands, and migrate to the pastoral land.”

Kham Magar families strategically plan the division of family labour during migration to enhance family income. Some family members engage in activities such as cattle rearing and agriculture, while others migrate seasonally for employment, depending on the availability of work during the dry season. The migration destinations may include Indian and Nepali pastoral lands and cities, with some family members remaining in lowland (*bang*) villages to oversee crops and livestock, depending on the household size. Migration, particularly during specific seasons, serves as a strategy to save food, allocate household labour efficiently, mitigate seasonal hardships, and generate additional cash for family needs and rural festivities among the economically disadvantaged households.

These migrations and livelihood strategies are directed by the rules formulated by the Gwala Raikar system in the villages. They are allowed to migrate to the designated pastoral land by their customary rules. The Gwala Raikar system also sets the selling and buying rates for agricultural products grown in the village, including beans, potatoes, and marijuana seeds/resin, as well as for collected herbs and forest products such as red mushrooms (*ek khutte cheu*) and hemp. A former secretary of Gwala Raikar Samiti, Mr. Om Bahadur Budha Magar (male, 55 years), explains:

“Our Samiti sets the prices for grains, legumes, hemp, and herbs. We even barter marijuana seeds for rice—one sack of seeds for three sacks of rice—which helps with food security.”

The Gwala Raikar Samiti's role in setting prices for village agro-farm products is increasingly challenged by market forces, especially with the rise of new towns nearby, Madhya Pahadi Lok-Marga (Mid-Hill Highway). While village goods are cheaper, villagers lack sufficient knowledge of market channels to maximise profits. Additionally, local cooperatives buy from multiple sources and sell at even lower prices, heightening competition and complicating the villagers' market participation.

Families manage both lowland (*bang*) and highland pastures under Samiti rules so that they are continually cultivated to reduce the risk to their subsistence. These practices of self-governance rules and seasonal migration to sustain traditional livelihoods echo the findings of other customary governance systems, where indigenous institutions play a central role in regulating ecological use, land access, and livelihood diversification (Ismi et al., 2024; Dennis et al., 2024). The main source of livelihood for Kham Magar families is agriculture, but the yield produced is insufficient to sustain the families. To supplement their income, families diversify their livelihoods by a combination of farming, pastoralism, herb collection, and seasonal migration to sustain themselves.

5. Customary governance and forest resources

The Kham Magar people possess a deep awareness of the consumption and preservation of their local resources. This traditional ecological knowledge is sustained through the Gwala Raikar Samiti system, a customary institution that regulates pastoral practices. The Samiti of each village determines the timing of seasonal pastoral migration and imposes fines on those who fail to migrate with their livestock within the designated period. Seasonal pastoral migration remains a very effective strategy for the Kham Magar villages to utilise and conserve seasonal forest resources sustainably. All major villages in the region maintain a Gwala Raikar Samiti, which is responsible for enforcing regulations in their area. They impose penalties on households that neglect to move their livestock to the assigned grazing areas.

The primary objective of the strict rules and fines imposed by the Gwala Raikar committees is to safeguard fodder resources in the lowland villages, ensuring a sustainable supply of feed for livestock during the prolonged dry season, particularly in cold weather conditions. These rules make sure there is enough fodder for livestock when grasses are limited. The system also prevents livestock from roaming freely, thereby avoiding damage to cultivated crops and minimising conflicts among families due to cattle entering farmlands. As Rampura (58 years, female) explains:

“Households that fail to move their livestock to designated pastoral areas are fined Nepalese Rupees, NPR 2,000 (USD 15.56) per buffalo and NPR 1,000 (USD 7.28) for other livestock. I believe that the imposition of these fines plays an important role in protecting village fodder resources and agricultural crops.”

Even with livestock grazed within cultivated and privately owned lowland areas, households are still required to pay the prescribed fine, reflecting the community's strong commitment to sustainable resource management. The fines, which range between NPR 400 and 1000 (USD 2.92-7.28) per animal, are charged depending on the breed, and the collected money is used in community work. Thus, the system fosters not only environmental sustainability but also community solidarity and village development.

During the seasonal migration, many Kham Magar families collect forest herbs, an activity that also engages school-aged youth during holidays. These young individuals often contribute to their educational costs by harvesting and selling herbs. While conducting fieldwork in the pastoral region, researchers observed local traders visiting the area to purchase collected herbs. Bir Prakash (18 years, male), who recently completed grade ten, shares:

“I am pleased to have found one kilogram of red mushrooms (Ekhutte Chyau) and sold them for 3,000 rupees (USD 21.84). This money will support my admission to grade 12.”

The Gwala Raikar system thus plays a multifaceted role in natural resource governance, encompassing regulations of grazing practices, conservation of fodder, the establishment of pastoral migration timelines, oversight of the collection of forest products, and imposition of fines to ensure compliance. It also monitors agricultural activities, including the harvesting of hemp and marijuana resin, reflecting a holistic framework for environmental stewardship and equitable resource distribution. It is a traditional yet highly effective environmental management institution embedded in the daily lives of the Kham Magar people.

A similar example of indigenous forest governance is found in the Palpa district. Lama (2023) claims that the Bheja System, a traditional governance system of Bahra Magarat (confederation of twelve Magars) in the Palpa district, treats some forest areas as sacred abodes of ancestral deities. This system enforces rules regarding forest use and protective measures for the conservation of medicinal herbs and commercial tree species, while ceremonies reinforce community bonds and foster collective responsibility.

6. Climate adaptation through regulated mobility

Seasonal mobility has long served as a traditional strategy for climate adaptation for communities facing environmental variability. In the context of increasing climate difficulty, seasonal mobility has significantly increased resilience. Households re-evaluate the scope of their farming activities and livelihood strategies to better respond to changing climatic conditions (Jha et al., 2018). Temporary migration, a traditional method of diversifying livelihoods, has seen increased prevalence in recent years due to the impacts of climate change, expanding from regional to national and even international levels (Biswas & Mallick, 2021).

Among the Kham community, decisions regarding seasonal and pastoral migration are closely influenced by seasonal weather patterns and environmental conditions. During the summer months, when the climate is more favourable for livestock, human habitation, and agricultural activities, families migrate to highland pastoral areas. As winter approaches, they return to their villages with their herds. In addition, members of the community seek temporary employment in cities across Nepal and India that share similar geographic and climatic conditions, further supporting household income and resilience. Jaman Budha (59 years old, male), a pastoral migrant, described the seasonal cycle of mobility and its underlying reason:

“My wife and I temporarily relocated to the Ramli pastoral area to raise cattle and cultivate a small portion of land. We adjust our grazing locations in response to changing weather conditions. In June and July, we reside in Hulneta, where the cold weather is still manageable. However, we plan to leave the area by August due to the increasing number of leeches, which creates unfavourable conditions for livestock and herders. By September, we will return to our village settlement, while some of our family members intend to migrate to India for employment, where the climate closely resembles that of our village.”

The Kham Magar community adjusts their farming practices based on altitude, temperature, and soil conditions in their territory. During the summer, families move to higher hills to grow crops that are better suited to the cooler climate and upland soil. This seasonal movement helps them make the best use of their land. However, in recent years, younger generations have increasingly migrated for work and education; there is a notable shift toward less labour-intensive forms of farming. Furthermore, climate variability and human-wildlife conflict, particularly with wild boars, porcupines, and monkeys, have prompted changes in crop cultivation choices. The traditional cultivation of staple crops such as maize and potatoes is increasingly being replaced by marijuana, which is less susceptible to wildlife damage and provides economic returns through the sale of seeds, resin, and hemp. As Sarbadhan (65 years, male) recounted:

“Our family used to cultivate various crops during pastoral migration; the damage caused by wild boar, porcupines, and monkeys forced us to replace potatoes, maize, and wheat with marijuana cultivation. Now, we trade marijuana seeds for rice and earn income from its thread and resin, which has proved more beneficial for us.”

The adaptive strategies employed by the Kham Magar families demonstrate an understanding of ecological systems and a practical approach to resource management. Seasonal mobility not only helps to minimise environmental risk but also maximises the use of land and labour based on weather patterns.

7. Customary leadership in communal activities and harmony

Customary self-governance institutions are developed to govern society in organised management (Siwakoti, 2018). Traditional governance systems play a crucial role in overseeing communal activities, resolving disputes, and preserving cultural traditions. The Gwala Raikar Samiti leads various communal efforts, such as maintaining infrastructure, trail/path renovation,

village water tap-stand construction, and managing shared resources. Samiti organises Jhara, a mandatory labour and material contribution for any public activities to complete the work in the villages. The committee also welcomes contributions to communal work made in honour of a particular person's name in the village. Their leadership ensures organised, collective responses to local challenges. Gwala Raikar Samiti chieftain, Una Bahadur Pun (50 years, male) from Khabang village, illustrates:

“Heavy rain sometimes damages dirt roads in our village. In such cases, the community, under Gwala Raikar's leadership, comes together to repair the damaged roads, clear the debris, and restore the paths affected by floods and landslides. We also remove fallen trees that block the way, ensuring that people can travel safely. These efforts help keep the roads accessible and support the well-being of the community.”

In addition to community activities, Gwala Raikar Samiti plays a crucial role in preserving cultural identity through rituals and ceremonies. The Gwala Raikar Samiti organises and raises funds for religious events like Bhume Puja, Gothala Puja, and Dibi Than Puja, which are tied to the protection of the land and people from natural disasters and the well-being of livestock. Regarding spiritual and ritual work, Secretary (Bhaidar) Sete Pun (36 years, male) explains:

“Every year, we perform different rituals and worship ceremonies to protect people from natural disasters, prevent landslides and floods, and keep our cattle safe. For example, we perform Bhume Puja to prevent landslides and protect our farmland and Gothala Puja to ensure the well-being of our cattle.”

These events require meticulous planning and financial oversight, which the traditional leaders handle. Their active involvement ensures that cultural and spiritual practices are preserved and continue to be integral to the community's identity, thus contributing to social stability and cultural continuity.

The traditional governance system is key in maintaining peace and resolving disputes within the community. The Gwala Raikar Samiti mediates conflicts fairly, often preventing escalation and strengthening cohesion. Taivilya, Satya Pun (63 years, male) states:

“The Raikar Committee plays an important role in resolving conflicts, promoting peace in the community, and preventing unnecessary disruptions. In the past, when there were no government laws in the village, the committee also helped with separations. People seeking resolution would come to us, and with mutual agreement, we worked with the village council to prepare traditional legal documents for separation.”

Tekman Garti (33 years, male), a former Gwala Raikar member from Pundanda village, states:

“We manage minor disputes by encouraging the parties involved to apologise and facilitating reconciliation within the community. However, issues that cannot be resolved locally are referred to the police. Additionally, conflicts between neighbouring communities are also addressed within the village to prevent escalation and avoid involving the police. As this reconciliation process is carried out through traditional methods, it tends to be more effective and easier to manage.”

These traditional systems for communal work, religious activities, and dispute handling are rooted in trust, neutrality, and communal values, ensuring harmony through locally accepted and traditionally tested approaches.

8. Erosion and the future of Gwala Raikar Samiti

The Gwala Raikar Samiti, a traditional governance institution of the Kham Magar community, has experienced a gradual erosion due to intersecting socio-economic, political, and cultural changes. Across many regions, similar customary institutions are diminishing in relevance because of modernisation, urban migration, and political reform. The disappearance of traditional institutions, custodians of indigenous knowledge, skills, and experiences, would represent a significant loss to society, particularly in terms of the valuable contributions these traditional practices offer toward the sustainable management of natural resources (Chigwenya and Manatsa, 2007). In Bhume, ward no. 2, Rukum East, Nepal, Gwala Raikar Samiti exemplifies this global pattern of decline. Historically central to managing communal resources and sustaining social cohesion, the Samiti now finds itself increasingly marginalised within the socio-political and economic fabric of village life. One of the most profound forces driving the decline of the Raikar system is socio-economic transformation. As local youth Mohan Budha (male, 38 years) explains:

“Our community and people living with us from other different castes and religious backgrounds show little interest in the Gwala Raikar tradition now. It is because of the shift in livelihoods, depletion of natural resources, and shrinking of pasture area, and most people prioritise non-farm activities, small businesses, and labour migration opportunities over sustaining these traditional practices.”

This statement highlights the broader shift in aspirations and livelihoods. The lure of urban employment, international migration, and new business opportunities has overshadowed the communal responsibilities that once anchored village life. Additionally, declining agricultural viability has undermined the economic foundations of the Samiti. The reduced number of pastoralist practices also contributed to diminishing the role of the Gwala Raikar tradition. The exodus of the younger generation from farming not only reduces available labour but also disrupts the transfer of traditional knowledge, further destabilising the system.

Political reforms have played a pivotal role in weakening Samiti's authority, and multi-party politics have fragmented the community, which has also influenced the Gwala Raikar Samiti. The shift toward a democratic republic and decentralised governance, especially the arrangement of ward and rural municipalities, has redefined local power dynamics. Dipesh Budha (male, 35 years) remarks:

“Following the adoption of a democratic republic form of governance, local authorities have assumed control over the daily lives of citizens, thereby limiting the powers and responsibilities of the Gwala Raikar Samiti. The emergence of diverse political ideologies and the prevalence of unhealthy political practices have further divided communities, eroding collective efforts for the common good.”

Decentralisation, while promoting inclusive governance, has inadvertently marginalised traditional customary institutions like Gwala Raikar Samiti. State institutions have assumed responsibilities previously held by the Samiti, reducing it to a symbolic entity, lacking both legal recognition and institutional support. Land reform policies, particularly the abolition of the traditional land tenure system and the move toward privatisation, have weakened the functions of the Samiti. Bureaucratic frameworks have often overlooked the cultural and communal significance of the traditional governance system, making it harder for local communities to sustain these ancestral practices. Modernisation has also reshaped cultural values. The erosion of ancestral practices signifies more than institutional decline; it represents the fading of a cultural heritage that once fostered collective stewardship of natural resources.

The perceptions of youth are critical to the future of the Gwala Raikar Samiti system. Many young people, disconnected from the system's historical significance, see it as outdated. While some recognise its potential for promoting sustainable community practices, the absence of

institutional support and incentives limits meaningful engagement. A local teacher, Karma Pun (male, 27 years), describes:

“Many of our youths are gradually forgetting the vital role played by Gwala Raikar Samiti in our villages. The preservation of this system requires raising awareness or discussion among youths by elders, integrating the Gwala Raikar System in local school curricula, and encouraging local government bodies to acknowledge its importance. I, as a youth, still see that Gwala Raikar Samiti can play a vital role in food security, preserving local culture, and promoting pastoral tourism.”

Addressing this decline requires a balanced approach. Government recognition of the Gwala Raikar Samiti system as a cultural institution is essential, but such formalisation must avoid over-regulation that could constrain its community-driven character. Intergenerational dialogue, educational inclusion, and recognition by local institutions are essential to explore the contextual role of the Gwala Raikar Samiti. For example, since the Gorilla Trek route passes through the villages and pastoral areas of the Bhume, the Samiti and local government can play a role in promoting pastoral tourism initiatives. Policy reforms that offer financial incentives, capacity-building programs, and inclusion in local development agendas could encourage greater community participation. Incorporating traditional land management systems into educational curricula may further promote awareness and appreciation among younger generations. Ultimately, the integration of communal principles of the Gwala Raikar Samiti with modern administrative practices could ensure the long-term preservation and revitalisation of this heritage system.

9. Conclusion

This study examined the Gwala Raikar Samiti, a customary governance institution of the Kham Magar community in Bhume-2, Rukum East, Nepal. Led by the Mukhiya, the Samiti continues to regulate communal lands, manage seasonal migration, resolve disputes, organise rituals, and support community welfare. The findings indicate that it functions not only as a cultural institution but also as an adaptive and sustainable system of land and resource governance, contributing to food security, rural livelihoods, and ecological balance. Despite pressures from state governance reforms and shifting socio-political contexts, which have undermined the authority and disrupted traditional leadership and knowledge systems, the Samiti endures in communal practices, seasonal routines, and cultural memory. This persistence emphasises its continued relevance. The study highlights the value of Indigenous governance systems in promoting sustainable resource management. Respectful and non-assimilative collaboration between customary institutions and formal governance structures can lead to solutions that are locally rooted, culturally sensitive, and flexible approaches to addressing local challenges. Comparative research across regions on customary institutions may further inform strategies for revitalising such systems within hybrid governance frameworks. Gwala Raikar Samiti faces significant threats, but its enduring presence demonstrates the value of community-led governance to sustain cultural identity, ecological stewardship, and inclusive development.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our gratitude to all the Gwala Rakar Samiti leaders, Mr. Una Bahadur Budha, *Sher/Mukhiya* (Chieftain), Satya Pun, *Taivilya*, and Sete Pun, *Bhaidar*, for their valuable support and guidance throughout our research journey. We are especially thankful to the elders Mr. Tej Bahadur Budha and Mr. Nar Bahadur Budha for sharing their deep cultural knowledge and lived experiences, which significantly enriched our understanding. We also acknowledge the enthusiastic participation and insights shared by the youths Mohan Budha,

Karma Pun, Tekman Pun, and Madan Budha of the community, whose voices and perspectives were vital to our study.

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

The authors declare no competing interests.

References

- Bertram, C., Wagner, W., & Trautwein, U. (2017). Learning historical thinking with oral history interviews: A cluster randomized controlled intervention study of oral history interviews in history lessons. *American Educational Research Journal*, 54(3), 444–484. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831217694833>
- Bhattachan, K. B. (2023). *Customary self-governance systems of the Tamhang (Thakali) nation*. Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact.
- Biswas, B., & Mallick, B. (2021). Livelihood diversification as key to long-term non-migration: Evidence from coastal Bangladesh. *Environment, Development and Sustainability*, 23(6). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10668-020-01005-4>
- Berkes, F. (2012). *Sacred ecology: Traditional ecological knowledge and resource management* (3rd ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203123843>
- Boege, V. (2011). Traditional approaches to conflict transformation: Potentials and limits. In B. Bloomfield, M. Fischer & B. Schmelzle (Eds.), *Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation* (pp. 431–457). Berghof Research Center for Constructive Conflict Management. https://berghof-foundation.org/files/publications/boege_handbookII.pdf
- Chigwenya, A., & Manatsa, D. (2007). *The history of natural resource management in Zimbabwe: A chronicle of how sustainable resource management has remained an elusive concept*. *Journal of Sustainable Development in Africa*, 9(2), 182–194.
- De Sales, A. (2003). The Kham Magar country: Between ethnic claims and Maoism. In *Resistance and the state: Nepalese experiences* (pp. 175–191). Berghahn Book.
- Dennis, T., Adson, T., Edwin, B., Ogwal, F., & Richard, K. (2024). Wetland restoration and conservation. Case of Uganda. *East African Journal of Environment and Natural Resources*, 7(1), 391–400. <https://doi.org/10.37284/eajenr.7.1.2153>
- Ismi, H., Hasanah, U., Nofrizal, N., & Wook, I. (2024). Revitalizing customary law: Reforming buffalo farming practices (Jalangan) in Menaming village for sustainable governance. *Journal of Law and Legal Reform*, 5(4), 1645–1672.
- Jha, C. K., Gupta, V., Chattopadhyay, U., & Amarayil Sreeraman, B. (2018). Migration as adaptation strategy to cope with climate change: A study of farmers' migration in rural India. *International Journal of Climate Change Strategies and Management*, 10(1), 121–141. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCCSM-03-2017-0059>
- Kenyon, T. (2016). Oral history and the epistemology of testimony. *Sociology of Epistemology*, 30(1), 45–66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02691728.2014.971912>
- Lama, S. (2023). *Indigenous Magar's Bheja system preserving forests in Nepal*. Earth Journalism Network. <https://earthjournalism.net/stories/indigenous-magars-bheja-system-preserving-forests-in-nepal>
- Magar, M. S. (2022). *Amurta saṃskṛti: Pradarśanakalā, paramparāgata saṃsthā ra jñāna*. National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities.

- Matose, F., Oyono, P. R., & Murombedzi, J. (2019). Customary authority and commons governance. In *Routledge handbook of the study of the commons* (pp. 334–344). Routledge.
- Mukoro, A. (2009). The interface between customary law and local government legislation in Nigeria: A retrospect and prospect. *International NGO Journal*, 4(4), 167–172.
- National Statistic Officer. (2022). *Nepal statistical year book 2021* (18th ed.). Central Bureau of Statistics.
- Pant, M. M., Suwal, R. P., Maharjan, S., Awale, O., Shrestha, R., & Lakha, P. (2023). Vernacular architecture of a rural Magar settlement of Nepal: The case of Taka, Putha Uttarganga Rural Municipality, East Rukum. *Far Western Review*, 1(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.3126/fwr.v1i2.62149>
- Pinter, M. (2021). Transformations of political consciousness in the process of state formation in Nepal (Doctoral dissertation). National University of Ireland Maynooth.
- Rai, D. R. (2024, September). Role of Gwala Raikar Samiti of Kham Magars in traditional livelihoods and natural resource management [Poster presentation]. *International Conference on Indigenous Led-Research and Education*, Kathmandu, Nepal. <https://doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.29255.10408>
- Rai, I. M. (2024). A crisis of moral ecology: Magar agro-pastoralism in Dhorpatan Hunting Reserve, Nepal. *PARKS*, 30(1), 57–68. <https://doi.org/10.2305/RZVD9721>
- Robbins, P. (2012). *Political Ecology: A Critical Introduction* (2nd ed.). Wiley-Blackwell.
- Robson, J. P., & Wiest, R. (2014). Transnational migration, customary governance, and the future of community: A case study from Oaxaca, Mexico. *Latin American Perspectives*, 41(3), 103–117. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0094582X13506689>
- Sherpa, P. (2024). Resource management of a legal pluralist indigenous community. *SMC Journal of Sociology*, 1(1), 101–119.
- Sherpa, P. (2024). Role of customary governance in resource management of a legal pluralist indigenous community. *SMC Journal of Sociology*, 1(1), 101–119. <https://doi.org/10.3126/sjs.v1i1.63807>
- Siwakoti, G. (2018). *Magar jaati*. Pairavi Prakashan.
- Smith, L. T. (1999). *Decolonising methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples* (3rd ed.). Zed Books.
- Thami, T. (2024). Customary governance and state legal system in Nepal. *Tri-Chandra Journal of Anthropology*, 1, 134–135. ISSN: 3059-9059.
- Thapa, G. P. (2019). Magars in the eyes of Western writers: A socio-anthropological review. *History, Literary Works, Politics, Society*. <https://govindthapa.wordpress.com/2019/06/18/magars-in-the-eyes-of-western-writers-a-socio-anthropological-review/>.
- Waters, D. E. (1975). Siberian shamanistic traditions among the Kham-Magars of Nepal. *Contributors to Nepalese Studies*, 2(1), 123–168.

